

John 20:1-18
April 24, '11
Easter Sunday

“WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

300.

300 PLUS.

THAT’S THE NUMBER OF QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

WE HAVE CONSIDERED JUST 8 OF THEM DURING LENT THIS YEAR.

AND NOW WE COME TO THE FINAL ONE.

IT’S A QUESTION JESUS ASKS MARY MAGDALENE & IT IS, PERHAPS, THE MOST BIZARRE QUESTION OF ALL.

IT’S A QUESTION AS RIDICULOUS-SOUNDING AS WHEN HE ASKED A MAN WHO HAD BEEN CRIPPLED FOR 38 YEARS, “*DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL?*”

JESUS, ON THE DAY OF EASTER, ASKS A TEARFUL MARY, “*WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?*”

IN THE SAME WAY THAT WE CAN IMAGINE THE SARCASTIC RESPONSES OF THAT LAME BEGGAR IN JERUSALEM, WE CAN IMAGINE MARY’S RESPONSE TO *THIS* QUESTION: “*OH, I’M LOOKING FOR THE LOCAL BAKER SO I CAN ADD ANOTHER LOAF OF BREAD TO MY ORDER FOR THE WEEK! WHO DO YOU THINK I’M LOOKING FOR, YOU DIMWIT GARDENER?!*”

BUT IN THE SAME WAY THAT THE QUESTION OF JESUS TO THAT POOR BEGGAR WAS VERY REAL, SO IS HIS QUESTION TO MARY.

IT REMINDS US OF THE ONE HE ASKED THE DISCIPLES, DOESN’T IT – “*WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?*”

AND, JUST LIKE *THAT* QUESTION, IT’S A QUESTION HE ASKS OF US AS WELL.

AND WHEN HE ASKS IT OF US, WE HAVE TO RE-ARRANGE THE EMPHASIS, DON’T WE?

IT’S NOT SO MUCH “WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?” AS IT IS, “WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

WHEN IT COMES TO THE DAY OF RESURRECTION, “WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?”

I WOULD IMAGINE FOR MANY OF US, FOR MOST OF US, PERHAPS I COULD BE SO BOLD AS TO SAY, FOR *ALL* OF US, WE’RE LOOKING FOR THAT WHICH WE SUGGESTED ON MAUNDY THURSDAY – WE’RE LOOKING FOR HOPE.

WE’RE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING BRIGHTER TO COME.

THERE WAS A “PEANUTS” CARTOON THAT SPEAKS TO THIS.

LUCY & LINUS ARE SITTING IN FRONT OF THE TELEVISION SET WHEN LUCY SAYS TO LINUS, “*GO GET ME A GLASS OF WATER.*”

LINUS LOOKS SURPRISED AND SAYS, “*WHY SHOULD I DO ANYTHING FOR YOU? YOU NEVER DO ANYTHING FOR ME.*”

“*ON YOUR 75TH BIRTHDAY,*” LUCY PROMISES, “*I’LL BAKE YOU A CAKE.*”

LINUS GETS UP, HEADS TO THE KITCHEN AND SAYS, “*LIFE IS MORE PLEASANT WHEN YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO.*”

LINUS IS RIGHT.

LIFE IS MORE PLEASANT WHEN YOU HAVE HOPE.

THAT'S WHAT MARY WAS LOOKING FOR THAT MORNING.

THAT'S WHAT ALL OF US ARE LOOKING FOR, ISN'T IT?

THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE THIS MORNING.

WE HAVE ALL COME WITH EXPECTATIONS.

WE EXPECT EASTER TO BURST IN UPON US.

WE WANT IT TO EXPLODE WITH UNBRIDLED JOY & ECSTASY.

WE WANT BRIGHT CLOTHES, BOLD HYMNS & BEAMING FACES.

WE WANT EXCITEMENT & ENTHUSIASM.

WE WANT EASTER IN ALL ITS GLORY!

AND, TO A GREAT EXTENTS, THOSE EXPECTATIONS HAVE BEEN FULFILLED THIS MORNING.

BUT, SOMEHOW, THIS READING FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL DOESN'T FIT THE EXPECTATIONS WE HAVE, DOES IT?

SOMEHOW, JOHN'S EASTER STORY DOESN'T FEEL LIKE IT'S BURSTING IN UPON US.

HIS TELLING OF EASTER ISN'T AT ALL LIKE MATTHEW'S WHERE WE HAVE AN EARTHQUAKE FOLLOWED BY AN ANGEL ROLLING BACK THE STONE & SITTING ON TOP OF IT – AN ANGEL WHOSE “*APPEARANCE WAS LIKE LIGHTNING & HIS RAIMENT WHITE AS SNOW.*”

JOHN'S EASTER DOESN'T *BURST* IN, SO MUCH AS IT *CREEPS* IN.

SO IT IS WITH MUCH OF LIFE.

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN EASTER EXPLODES BUT, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, IT CREEPS IN – SOMETIMES EVEN WHEN WE'RE NOT EXPECTING IT – SOMETIMES WHEN WE'RE NOT EVEN AWARE THAT IT'S HAPPENING.

YOU SEE, JESUS DIDN'T BURST FORTH FROM THE TOMB IN FULL VIEW OF THE WORLD.

NOR DOES EASTER BURST FORTH INTO *OUR* LIVES.

OH, SOMETIMES IT DOES.

AND MAYBE THAT'S WHY IT'S A GOOD THING TO HAVE THE DIFFERENT ACCOUNTS OF THE RESURRECTION.

THERE *ARE* THOSE FOR WHOM MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT WORKS BETTER – THE EARTHQUAKE, DESCENDING ANGEL, BRIGHT LIGHTS & GLORY!

YES, WE NEED MATTHEW'S ACCOUNT OF THE RESURRECTION FOR THOSE MOMENTS OF LIFE WHEN EASTER BURSTS UPON US IN ALL ITS BEAUTY & BOLDNESS.

BUT THAT'S NOT THE KIND OF EASTER JOHN GIVES US & WE NEED *HIS* KIND OF EASTER AS WELL.

FOR THE TRUTH IS, FOR MOST OF US, EASTER DOESN'T BURST IN, BUT CREEPS IN.

JOHN'S IS A GOSPEL OF MAGNIFICENT IMAGERY.

WHEN YOU READ JOHN, YOU HAVE TO DO SO WITH YOUR MIND SET ON UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING THAT LIES DEEPLY HIDDEN IN HIS WORDS.

HE BEGINS WITH THE MAJESTIC PROCLAMATION, "*IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD & THE WORD WAS WITH GOD & THE WORD WAS GOD. THE WORD BECAME FLESH & DWELT AMONG US...THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS & THE DARKNESS CANNOT OVERCOME IT.*"

AND THEN HERE - AT THE END OF THE GOSPEL - WE HAVE A DIVINE REVERSAL FOR NOW, "*THE FLESH BECOMES WORD*" WITH THE QUESTION OF JESUS TO MARY - "*WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?*"

JOHN BEGINS WITH WORDS ABOUT "LIGHT" & "DARK" AND HE USES THOSE CONTRASTING IMAGES THROUGHOUT HIS GOSPEL.

WHEN HE TELLS US THAT NICODEMUS CAME TO JESUS "*BY NIGHT,*" HE'S NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT THE HOUR AT WHICH HIS VISIT OCCURRED.

HE'S TALKING ABOUT THE STATE OF HIS SOUL.

AND HERE, AT THE END OF HIS GOSPEL, IT'S THE SAME.

THE OTHER GOSPELS TELL US IT WAS DAWN...IT WAS MORNING...THE SUN WAS RISING.

BUT NOT JOHN.

JOHN TELLS US THAT MARY CAME TO THE TOMB, "*WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK.*"

IN SAYING THAT, HE MEANS A GREAT DEAL MORE THAN THE TIME OF DAY.

HE IS TELLING US THAT, FOR MARY, IT WAS A TIME OF LIFE.

EASTER COMES TO US IN A TIME OF DARKNESS & CONFUSION.

IT COMES IN THE MIDST OF SORROW & SADNESS.

IT'S NOT IN BURSTING BRIGHT LIGHTS & SHOUTS OF "*HALLELUJAH!*"

IT CREEPS IN SLOWLY & GRADUALLY SINKS IN, EVENTUALLY DWELLING DEEP WITHIN YOUR SOUL.

I THINK THAT'S WHAT'S SO APPEALING ABOUT JOHN'S VERSION OF THE RESURRECTION.

JOHN'S ACCOUNT MORE ACCURATELY FITS OUR WORLD & OUR LIVES.

EASTER IN JOHN EMERGES FROM THE DARKNESS OF DEATH, THE SHADOWS OF CONFUSION & THE SORROWS OF SADNESS IN OUR LIVES.

THAT'S WHEN WE NEED EASTER THE MOST, ISN'T IT?

WE, LIKE MARY, NEED IT FOR THOSE "*WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK,*" TIMES IN LIFE.

WE NEED IT WHEN EVERYTHING ELSE CRASHES IN UPON US & WE FIND OURSELVES REELING IN PAIN & AGONY.

THAT'S WHEN THE GOOD NEWS OF JOHN'S EASTER STORY MEANS THE MOST TO US, BECAUSE EASTER STILL CREEPS UP ON US IN THE DARKNESS.

EASTER COMES FOR THOSE WHO, LIKE MARY, FIND THEMSELVES CRYING THEIR EYES OUT.

EASTER TELLS US THAT GOD'S LOVE IS REAL.

IT TELLS US THAT, IN THE END, IT IS LIFE & NOT DEATH THAT HAS THE LAST WORD.

I THINK JOHN'S ACCOUNT OF RESURRECTION IS PERHAPS THE ONE THAT RESONATES WITH MOST OF US BECAUSE INSTANTANEOUS EASERS AREN'T WHAT MOST OF US EXPERIENCE.

RESTORATION TO NEW LIFE DOESN'T HAPPEN IN AN INSTANT.

IT DOESN'T BURST IN BOLDLY – IT CREEPS IN GENTLY.

JOHN'S STORY OF EASTER IS ONE THAT YOU CAN TAKE HOME WITH YOU WHEN YOU LEAVE HERE THIS MORNING.

IT'S ONE THAT CAN GO TO SCHOOL OR WORK WITH YOU NEXT WEEK.

IT'S A TRUTH THAT CAN CLIMB INTO YOUR SOUL & FIND A HOME.

BECAUSE, YOU SEE, IF EASTER'S JOY & PROCLAMATION REQUIRED THE BLARE OF TRUMPETS, THE THUNDER OF ORGANS, AND THE SHINING BRIGHTNESS OF WHITE BANNERS – IF THAT KIND OF SETTING WERE THE ONLY PLACE WHERE EASTER COULD THRIVE – THEN WHO AMONG US COULD TAKE THAT BACK HOME WITH THEM?

WHO AMONG US WOULD CLAIM THAT, AT THE END OF EACH DAY, WE FIND OURSELVES BURSTING WITH JOY OVER EVERYTHING WE'VE EXPERIENCED OVER THE PAST 24 HOURS?

HOW MANY OF US FIND OURSELVES ON A NEVER-ENDING JOY RIDE THROUGH LIFE – EFFORTLESSLY MOVING FROM ONE EXPERIENCE OF ECSTASY TO THE NEXT?

IF THAT DESCRIBES *YOUR* JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE, YOU ARE TRULY BLESSED.

I'M AFRAID THAT'S NOT THE WAY LIFE IS FOR MOST OF US.

SO MANY OF US AWAKEN “*WHILE IT IS STILL DARK,*” WONDERING IF THE SUN WILL EVER SHINE AGAIN.

THAT'S WHY JOHN'S STORY OF EASTER CAN SO PROFOUNDLY MOVE US.

BECAUSE SOMEWHERE IN THE SHADOWS OF YOUR LIFE, WHILE IT IS STILL DARK, A TRULY RISEN SAVIOR CREEPS IN.

HE'S THERE WHEN THE DARKNESS IS DEEPEST, WHEN SORROW IS STRONGEST, WHEN GRIEF IS GREATEST.

WHILE IT IS STILL DARK, HE GENTLY STEPS INTO YOUR LIFE & WRAPS HIS ARMS AROUND YOU TO TELL YOU THE DARKNESS WON'T HAVE THE LAST WORD.

HE DOESN'T ALWAYS BURST IN WITH EARTHQUAKES, ANGELS, BRIGHTNESS & GLORY.

HE DOESN'T ALWAYS SHOW UP IN AN INSTANTANEOUS MOMENT OF HIGH EXULTATION.

NEVERTHELESS, HE IS THERE.

HE'S THERE TO ASK, “*WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?*”

AND HE'S THERE TO BE THE VERY ONE FOR WHOM YOU DESPERATELY SEARCH.

HE'S THERE TO TELL YOU YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

HE'S THERE TO ASSURE YOU THAT, IN THE END, DEATH DOESN'T WIN THE BATTLE.

HE'S THERE TO TELL YOU A NEW DAY IS ABOUT TO DAWN.

HE'S THERE TO TELL YOU THAT, *WHILE IT IS STILL DARK,* A BRIGHT & GLORIOUS DAY AWAITS YOU.

THE GREAT NOVELIST VICTOR HUGO SAID THIS ABOUT EASTER: “*THE TOMB IS NOT A BLIND ALLEY – IT IS A THOROUGHFARE.*”

IT CLOSES UPON THE TWILIGHT BUT OPENS UPON THE DAWN.”

THE PROMISE OF EASTER IS THAT OUR OWN TOMBS ARE LIKE THAT.

THE DAILY TOMBS IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES IMPRISONED ARE TOMBS THAT, THROUGH CHRIST'S RESURRECTION PROMISE, WILL OPEN TO A NEW DAWN.

OUR FINAL TOMB IS THE SAME.

ONE DAY, YOU WILL LEAVE THIS LIFE & ENTER A TOMB OF DEATH.

BUT IT WON'T BE A BLIND ALLEY.

IT WILL BE A THOROUGHFARE.

YOUR TOMB WILL CLOSE UPON THE TWILIGHT BUT IT WILL OPEN UPON THE DAWN.

THANK GOD FOR JOHN'S UNDERSTATED ACCOUNT OF EASTER.

THANK GOD FOR GENTLE RESURRECTIONS THAT CAN CREEP INTO YOUR HEART & TRANSFORM YOUR SOUL WITH NEW LIFE & NEW HOPE. AMEN.

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